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WRIGHT MORRIS AND THE
AMERICAN MOTHER

by

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B.A. Montana State University, 1955

Presented in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

MONTANA STATE UNIVERSITY

1961

Approved by:


Chairman, Board of Examiners


Dean, Graduate School

AUG 18 1961

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INTRODUCTION

Wright Morris has written over the past twenty years a steady stream of novels, but despite the critical praise which has greeted nearly every new book, the public has not rushed to buy and read his work. Nor has there been much thematic or comparative criticism in the literary magazines. Even among university faculties he has not gained general readership (one of the big ten schools lists only a few of his books in its library). It might be well, then, in an introductory way briefly to discuss style and several of the themes which relate to the subject of the thesis.

I have chosen to deal in this thesis with the mothers presented in several novels; my aim will be to show the character and range of dominance of the American mother as Morris delineates her. Before proceeding to a discussion of this theme and other relevant themes, it seems necessary to give an estimation of Morris' place in American letters.

In a collection of essays called The Territory Ahead, Morris evaluates those writers who form the mainstream of American literature: Thoreau, Whitman, Melville, Twain, James, Wolfe, Fitzgerald, Hemingway and Faulkner. Without a coherent aesthetic system, the essays show, by means of a series of perceptions of considerable vitality and subtlety, Morris' awareness of what he is about as well as

what the others were about. Despite the variety of individual differences (compare for instance the fictive voices of Thoreau and Faulkner, of James and Whitman, of Hemingway and Wolfe), despite the shift from romanticism to realism with attendant changes both in technique and in general outlook, Morris finds a thematic linkup among these writers. The dominant theme throughout our literature, Morris thinks, is flight, not only from the civilizing influences of Aunt Sally, from a female domination of culture, that is--to the woods, the river, the sea--but flight also from the present into a nostalgically evoked past. Thus Thoreau's protest against a society cluttered by useless furniture led him to the lonely experiment of Walden. Morris points out that in the American imagination Thoreau is forever at Walden (although actually his vigil at the pond occupied only two years of his life). Whitman took to the open road and made vivid to the American consciousness the image of the poet as a vagabond, deserter from society in a spirit of comradely loafing. Melville's great work proposes a pushing-off from the "slavish" shore, from all that represents the warmth and comfort of home, to the great unfathomable sea. Twain's Huckleberry Finn sends the boy Huck, in revolt against his female guardian, down the great river on a raft. In our own time, Wolfe fled to Europe and in his work to romantic bombast, Hemingway looks back to "The Big Two-Hearted River" of his youth as a source of purity

before growing up corrupted it, and Faulkner finds both in the past and in the Mississippi wilderness sources for his rage against the present. Only James of all these writers lived and wrote in the present, amid the currents of American society. His insights into American life in The American Scene, for instance, in a passage in which he portrays New York as divided into downtown where men rule the business world, and uptown where women rule society, culture and religion, seem to Morris prophetic insights. One technique of the modern novel which is ultimately traceable to James and of which Morris makes constant use is the restricted point of view. His commonest organization of it revolves the viewpoint among a series of characters, giving each chapter and a share in advancing the plot. A series of monologues result, with some interesting developments in time relationships. The total effect is of switching from one consciousness to another while generally advancing in time. This is not an innovation on Morris' part; others, notably Virginia Wolfe and Faulkner, worked out such multiple viewpoints. Morris is unique only in the consistency with which he employs this technique.

Although Morris occasionally sides with the writers of flight, as when he loses out to nostalgia over the home town or Nebraska farm of a generation ago, he more often makes one with James in resolutely keeping his eye on the

present, no matter how deadening he finds its atmosphere. It seems to me that Morris' attitude toward his home place, expressed through various characters, is ambivalent: "He could leave, that is, but he would never get over it."¹ Morris never got over Nebraska, which he both loves and hates. He loves it as it was, hence the nostalgia, and hates it as it is, though he must explain just what it is like.

Against Wolfe, his great complaint is that Wolfe never matured as a writer. His irritation with Wolfe as a writer who failed to refine his raw material gives a clue to the way Morris works: he is a stylistically spare, highly selective writer whose control of his material never slackens. The high degree of importance attaching in his work to what Morris calls the artifact, reminds one of that father of the realists, Flaubert. Like the author of Madame Bovary Morris depends on the object clearly presented, whether it be a photograph, an old pair of shoes, or the arrangement of furniture in a room, to send out its own waves of connotation, to figure forth its own meaning. Morris belongs among the realists both in terms of style and of milieu, and what stamps him a modern writer is the fact that he finds the world either comically or horribly absurd.

¹Wright Morris, The Works of Love (New York: 1952), p.

When the artist Gordon Boyd is confronted with a motel-keeper who demands to know whether he wants to witness an atomic explosion, and who writes in the register "Wake Before Bomb," the reader is left with a choice of howling with laughter--or just howling. The simplicity and straightforwardness of his style is reminiscent of Hemingway, but in terms of his milieu Morris has more in common with Sinclair Lewis and Sherwood Anderson. Like the last-named writers he has devoted himself to probing and exposing the poisons just under the surface of small town life.

Small town life seen through a smog of nostalgia has become the province in popular culture of the illustrator Norman Rockwell, which perhaps accounts for his appearance in The Territory Ahead as the subject of a critical essay. Although the reader may wonder just at first what Rockwell is doing in such distinguished company, it soon becomes clear that what he has illustrated in hundreds of Post covers and elsewhere are the clichés of small town life against which Morris has pitted himself in all his work. Rockwell gives us "the black-eyed tomboy, the hopeless, lovable pup, the freckled-faced young swain on his first date, the kid with white flannels at his first prom. . . dreams of innocence, as a rule, before they become corrupt."²

²Wright Morris, The Territory Ahead (New York: 1959), p. 118.

Morris consistently undercuts these dreams of innocence to find the American Way, at its heart, vacuous and despairing:

Over the sleeping city the moon was rising, and there in the street were the shady elms, the flowering shrubs, and the sidewalks slippery with maple pods. On the porches were swings, limp, sagging hammocks, roller skates. . . and in the houses the men and women lay asleep. . . . All one could say was that whatever it was it was there in the house, like a vapor. . . . As a writer of books he would have to say that this vapor made the people yellow in color, gave them flabby bodies, and made their minds inert. As if they were poisoned, all of them, by the air they breathed. And such a writer would have to explain why this same air, so fresh and pure in the street, seemed to be poisoned by the people breathing it. So that in a way even stranger than the moon, they poisoned themselves.³

At the heart of America--physically a small town in the Midwest, psychically the middle-class home dominated by Mother--Morris discovers an appalling deadness. This representative home serves as the battlefield for Morris' attack on the cliches of American life. The people who inhabit his home town belong to the last generation and though they have lived through turbulence, war, depression, and the enlivening influences of the twenties, their attitudes, their lives appear singularly untouched by it all. In his irritation, not really with Rockwell, but with the sentimental myths he portrays and which Americans embrace, Morris examines the kinds of people, the way of life (or non-life)

³Wright Morris, The Works of Love (New York: 1952), pp. 134-136.

that Rockwell enhances and Morris rejects:

Maturity. . . seen through the forbearance of Mr. Rockwell seems to be an adolescent pipe dream of the genial aspects of senility. The pursuit of youth is made more visible, rather than less, in these gentle fuddy-duddies, Mom and Pop, and their pathetic inability to grow up. A certain aging has taken place, but such growth as we observe is downward and backward. That Mother takes Father's strong points for granted is obvious, desperately so--because Father's strong points are touchingly invisible. A genial pathos, sentimentally evoked, would seem to be the mortar that binds them together. . . ⁴

These gentle fuddy-duddies, Mom and Pop, inhabit the house on the side street just off Main Street in the territory of Wright Morris. He possesses them in common with Rockwell, but whereas Rockwell preserves them in the cliché, Morris sees them with quite another eye, for quite another purpose. He sees them with the thin veneer of genial pathos and sentimentality stripped away so that the true "relationship" in which they live together becomes pitifully clear.

One of the major themes running through the novels of Morris concerns Mom and Pop and the relationship between them. As has been indicated, Morris generalizes them into Mom and Pop, that is, typical Americans of a generation ago. Although they may live just outside Philadelphia or New York, they embody the kind of thinking, the moral assumptions of a small town. "Small towns. . . were all great

⁴Morris, The Territory Ahead (New York, 1959), pp. 121-22.

places to be from. But that, of course, was the dilemma. They left, but they never got away. Trailing along behind them, like clouds of glory, were the umbilical cords. . . . Thousands stretched to reach Chicago. Millions stretched to reach New York."⁵

Realizing that Morris intended these men and women to represent not only a certain family relationship, but also a whole generation and a set of values implicit in the small town, it seems to me that he has accomplished something more, that he has created a number of husbands and wives who typify Americans generally. To the degree to which the values of a small town businessman's family in a home more or less ruled by his wife, can be detected as generally operative in our society, the Ormsbys, Porters and McKees represent us all.

Because in two of the novels there are fully developed portraits of mothers illustrating specifically the characters and values which make up a composite, typical character, I will deal in my examination chiefly with these two, the character called Mother in Man and Boy, and Mrs. Porter from The Deep Sleep. Since these two characters are compellingly similar in outlook and habit, I will examine them as interchangeable representatives of a prototype. Other characters

⁵Wright Morris, The Field of Vision (New York: 1956), p. 118.

from The Field of Vision and Ceremony in Lone Tree will serve to reinforce the composite picture and provide variations on this theme. Two other themes, paralleling and informing the theme of the dominant mother, deserve some mention here. One of these concerns the frontier. The frontier settlement grew into the small town, which Morris finds still the ethnic center of America in spite of the urban movement of both our writers and our people. The families who inhabit the small town stand rooted in the frontier; among the surviving old people who represent the pioneers, the women are at least as stubborn and as grittily independent as the men. One old lady, at least, as will be demonstrated, has been an absolute domestic tyrant. The frontier has become Lone Tree, a ghost town, but those who left it for the East are nonetheless haunted by it. They return, like the artist Agee Ward (The Man Who Was There), who exiled himself in Europe, but sent home sketches of the privy on the farm back in Nebraska; or like the family clan of Ceremony in Lone Tree they attempt a ritual reincarnation of the frontier, an attempt which ends as a funeral and a symbolic marriage uniting a young sexpot with a stuttering cowboy. A few remain, like old man Scanlon, to haunt the ghost town. His characters, like Morris himself, can neither escape from nor return to the past, to the frontier.

A third theme concerns the place of the artist in

American society. Lack of place, really--for Morris finds, as almost every writer of the twentieth century has, that the artist, rejected by a society to which he will not ponder, is in exile. He is the gadfly still, the self-conscious intelligence or eye which judges our society and finds it lacking. The problem of the artist today, as presented in the character of Gordon Boyd, is whether he can wake up the sleeping McKees (Mom and Pop) before the Bomb, whether they would not after all prefer to go sleeping, whether, in any event, there is the slightest hope of his being able to rouse them. Another artist, Paul Webb, rages against the middle class in which he finds himself trapped, but cannot win over the established values represented by Mother. Only in one book, The Man Who Was There, does Morris present an artist winning against the middle class. In the gradual rebirth of a spinster, the artist Agnes Ward's spiritual (and literal) help, there is a sense of hope. However, the old maid does not begin the process of freeing herself from her death-in-routine until after the death of the artist. In other words, he had to die to do it. This notion of the function of the artist as savior, vicariously promoting the spinster's rebirth, comes perilously close to sentimentalism; the book is saved, I think, by its demon of humor; the picture of the spinster on her first toot, drunkenly chewing the veil of her hat, and going to sleep in a basket

of laundry, this ability Morris possesses to disguise his meaning in a guffaw, redeems the book from its own theme and permits the reader's acceptance of its deeper implications.

Whether in futile attack, in impotent indecision or in subtle regeneration, the artists, naturally enough, act as spokesmen for the author, true voices through which he presents his own viewpoint. These alter-egos of Morris prove his profound dissatisfaction with the failure of America to come of age, the failure of Americans to grow up. Morris' value to American literature as a whole I cannot pretend to assess. Leslie A. Fiedler in his book Love and Death in the American Novel calls Morris ". . . the most distinguished of our recent, serious comic novelists. . . who. . . has been trying to convince his readers that Nebraska is the absurd hell we all inhabit."⁶ That such a uniquely American writer has failed to find an American audience cannot really be explained. If it is occasionally true that a kind of drama is missing in the quiet tone, the calm unhurried voice that speaks in the novels, yet it must be said in defense that Morris writes of people whose lives have, outwardly at least, little drama and whose voices are seldom raised. If he sometimes concentrates on an object

⁶Leslie A. Fiedler, Love and Death in the American Novel (New York: 1960), p. 471.

to the point of dullness, it is nevertheless this succession of incandescent objects which mark him as both an individual and an authentic voice in American letters. The fineness of his perceptions, his sensitivity toward situations and people which identify themselves as peculiarly American, together with the breadth and accuracy of his commentary on American life, allows a claim for his being not only a good, but an important writer. In a time when shoddy writing, shouting with the banal, goes to the top, perhaps real distinction will lie with a man unpopular in his own time, who has gone carefully about his work and who shows us with it the assumptions upon which we have built our lives.

SECTION I: MOTHER AS TYRANT

Mr. Ormsby turned slowly on the bed, careful to keep the coil springs quiet, and as he lowered his feet he reached for his socks on the floor. They were gone. Well, he should have known that. They were gone Sunday mornings and all National holidays. This was not a National holiday, but it was a great day for Mother, and time, for him, anyhow, to change his socks. The old pair she had dropped down the laundry chute. . . From the closet, by feel--as the chain dragging on the light made a ratchet--he selected his Sunday pants, and a worn-only-one-time shirt. Once he got it on, Mother wouldn't notice it. Until he got it on she would look at the collar, to see if the wings turned up, or worse yet, held certain parts of it to her nose. As a test it wasn't really sound, but she relied on it. She would never say "aye," "yes," or "no," but merely hand him back the shirt, or walk down the hall toward the laundry chute with it. The spring lid on the chute came down like a gavel and meant much the same thing.

As his drawer to the bureau was stuck, Mr. Ormsby opened the one above it and reached in behind it to fish out a pair of clean socks. They were in a neat, flat wad, like a pin-cushion.⁷

The details, familiar as our own dirty socks, tell us precisely where we are: in a slightly run-down but carefully tended frame house with old-fashioned light fixtures and bad plumbing, watching a fugitive husband go through the ritual of rising. At home, in other words, is where the reader is, right in the middle of the middle class. The general situation, that of a husband rendered harmless and generally helpless by his wife, is as familiar as one's

⁷Wright Morris, Man and Boy (New York: 1951), pp. 8-9.

next door neighbor, as near as the nearest television family comedy. Familiar, too, are the chain pull, the bang of the laundry chute, the intricate knot in the clean socks, and Mother's suspicious sniffing of the shirt. These details tell us also that the husband of the story is middle-aged, of moderate income, and, as the tenor of the scene indicates, Mother-dominated. Reading on, we find that Mr. Ormsby has risen in order to prepare breakfast; when he finds something gone bad in the refrigerator he goes furtively to bury it. Mother sees him:

In the window corner she paused to watch Mr. Ormsby, a garden fork in his hand, crawl through the rhododendron at the back side of the garage. He wore his rubber raincoat, and the flap concealed something. She knew. She let him get to the back of the yard, then she hammered with her brush on the bathtub plumbing until the sound, like the pipes of an organ, seemed to vibrate the house. She stopped hammering to watch him run for the house. She was in the bedroom, at the back of the closet, seated among the toenail clippings, when she heard him skid on the papers near the stove. He fell, then he got up and opened the door.

"Mother--?" he said.

"Is it blue or brown for Navy, Warren?"

In the quiet she could hear water somewhere.

"Do I hear water running?" she asked.

"Just boiling, Mother."

"Oh, Warren--"

"Yes, Mother--"

"Is it blue or brown for Navy?"

"It's blue, Mother," he answered. "For the Navy it's blue."⁸

When we have noted the detail and registered the tone of

⁸Ibid., pp. 40-41.

the dialogue, as that of queen to serf, the book's theme becomes clear: it is the absolute tyranny of Mother. Again the details, in all their homeliness focus the reader on small-town America and give solidity to what Morris wants to say.

The question of how Mother gained such dominance is only partially answered by Morris. One of the stratagems she uses to maintain supremacy, Mother learned as a child:

" . . . this was the first boy that she remembered . . . and he brandished his glass dagger at her. She had never hurt or struck a living thing--not up until that moment--so it was strange how hard she really hit him, and how well she aimed. . . even before her father picked her up, she knew what she knew, and that it would stand by her for life. In dealing with the male, use the element of surprise."⁹

While it may be said that Mother employs the element of surprise freely in dealing with her husband, the explanation that she discovered how to use it as a child and in such an incidental manner, does not seem wholly satisfactory. Where did the child derive the notion of opposing herself to males in general? As an accident? If so, this tactic is peculiar to Mother, but I think the author intends to present it as a typical feminine weapon. In other novels he has suggested that Mother derived her aggressiveness from her own mother and that she passes it on, in turn, to her daughter. She has passed untouched through the twentieth century by

⁹Ibid., p. 50.

means of a constant reference to a moral structure characteristic of the nineteenth, specifically, the late Victorian era; she agrees with the moral notions of a society in which morality came to mean manners and finally etiquette (one referred to the limbs of a piano), a society in which the term morality had come to deal exclusively with sex, or rather the repression of it.

Many illustrations can be found of Mother's use of surprise to insure control of her husband. Here are several:

"Now let me take care of that, Mother.." he said, but being as she often was when her mind was busy, preoccupied that is, she walked right past him and took her stand at the sink. . . . "Mother--" he said, "now you telephone. You better telephone while you're sure to get her."
 "Cold water," Mother said matter-of-factly.
 "Cold water for eggs."¹⁰

Mother's remark here combines the element of surprise with several other interesting qualities. It shows Mr. Ormsby up as foolish, a person whose remarks are safely ignored, and it serves to introduce a subject--the proper method for washing egg off a plate--upon which he has already been effectively silenced. The sharp swerve of subject is characteristic of Mother, as in this passage:

"According to her letter--" Mr. Ormsby began--
 "Warren," she said, "your hands are dripping."¹¹

Not only skillful in surprising him, and in shutting off a

¹⁰Ibid., p. 53.

¹¹Ibid., p. 54.

subject, Mother also constantly puts her husband in the wrong, like a child. Another tactic she finds helpful is to move frequently, to be missing, in the next room behind a piece of furniture, or suddenly close at hand.

When these stratagems do not altogether subdue her husband, Mother has another weapon ready:

In very jovial tones Mr. Grimsby said: "I'll bet we're right back here before dar, Mother."
 . . . That was all he said, but in the middle of her note, right at the end of the word "days," she dropped the pencil, took a tuck in her bathrobe, and headed for the stairs. He knew. He knew what the tuck in that bathrobe meant. Mother never argued, she never raised her voice, she merely took a tuck in whatever she was wearing and then a week might pass before she spoke to anyone. The silent treatment left no room for argument. . .

Although he had been through this a thousand times--into it, that is, he had never been through it--he was never ready for it, somehow it always took him by surprise. And after all of these times, it never left him anything at all but sick.¹²

Mother's counterpart, Mrs. Porter of The Deep Sleep, also finds that a swift change of subject can jar an opponent or confuse him; in either case her advantage is sure. This lady is also the undisputed ruler of her home ("it's her bailiwick") and Parsons, the hired man, says of her: "I don't suppose you noticed. . .how she wouldn't let me have both cream and sugar? . . .but when he (Judge Porter) got out of the house, he sneaked off and took it. He had the cream, and the sugar, an' just about everything she wouldn't

¹²Ibid., p. 54.

let him have."¹³ Judge Parker, a man of some importance in civic affairs, also had to finish off one stale loaf of bread before another could be purchased.

If the husbands of these dominating wives deserve the reader's pity, it must be tempered with some contempt, or at least irritation, for they have delivered up their manhood to their wives. Mr. Ormsby calls his wife Mother, and the private he has picked up on the train calls her "your mother," which pretty well expresses the relationship between them. A man who has to be reminded to button his fly, he once got lost in New York: "She told him to get on a train and hurry right back. So he did, feeling like a boy who had lost his mother in a big department store, but who had been reassured that everything was all right. That he wouldn't be spanked, and that his mother had not lost him."¹⁴ Mr. Ormsby has paid for this protection--paid in a real sense, with his life. His life, like his time, is not his own but belongs to Mother. Whether pleading, placating, evading, or tiptoeing around her, his whole attention is absorbed by Mother. So exhaustive is this absorption that Mr. Ormsby is surprised to find himself talking to the private about events of his boyhood--surprised, in other words, that he

¹³Wright Morris, The Deep Sleep (New York, 1953), p. 87.

¹⁴Morris, Man and Boy, p. 135.

can remember a fragment of his life which was his own, unabsorbed by Mother's life.

Not only does he relinquish his time to Mother, but he spends it figuratively on tiptoe. Never just sure how to satisfy her, he makes vague motions of appeasement, but his mind is poised in apprehension, ready to flinch when the always-imminent judgment falls. Not that he questions it. His identity as small boy shows in this: that he never questions her judgment or the punishments she assigns. Like a very young child he finds Mother totally admirable, a perfect being, the center and circumference of his world. There is little hope of his ever growing up.

Another middle-aged boy-husband, Walter McKee (The Field of Vision), although he has less awe and more simple admiration for his wife, assumes a characteristic place in relation to her: "Coming up behind her, never beside her, always that tag-along step behind her, she could hear McKee walking on the cuffs of his new pants."¹⁵ McKee docilely accepts his wife's judgment of him as not much of a man. The most significant event of his life was when he had shot a hog as a boy of fifteen and someone thrust into his pants an ear of corn as bait; afterwards McKee felt that the head hog was laughing at him. The question of his manhood was always laughable. McKee's commonest idea of himself, in which his

¹⁵Morris, The Field of Vision (New York: 1956), p. 39.

wife concurs, is that he looks foolish.

Judge Porter, greatly beloved by the community in which he lives, is a man whose business life is belied by his home life. Although he commands respect publicly, the Judge is a displaced person at home; he has to retire to the attic to smoke a cigar, or to the back of the garden where he eats candy in secret. Further, his dependence on Mrs. Porter is nearly as complete as that of Mr. Ormsby. The dying Judge has his bed moved so that he can touch the bed on which his wife slept--"She wasn't in it any more, but the Judge didn't want to be alone."¹⁶

Whether they chose their wives as mothers or were victimized by them, the point remains that these men resemble small boys fearful of Mother's wrath and in need of her protection.

Of the children in the novels, only Katherine Porter regards her husband with her mother's eye ("When he couldn't speak without swearing, she knew that she had to do something about him.").¹⁷ The youngest generation, in Morris' latest book, Ceremony in Lone Tree, are portrayed as a hopeless lot, typified by a sexpot girl who takes long baths in the hope of avoiding pregnancy, a little monster who throws blue-faced fits, and a couple of teen-aged murderers. All

¹⁶The Deep Sleep, p. 123.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 76.

are engaged in a truculent battle with their elders. Over the generation before the last, Mother's tyranny extends, but in at least two of the books the sons rebel. In Man and Boy, the plot centers on Mother's christening of a boat in honor of her son, killed in World War II. This young man had always stood up to his mother in a way that shocked his father--by staring through her, by sitting or lying under the newspapers which cover all the furniture as part of Mother's housekeeping mania, and especially by possessing and shooting a b.b. gun. As an ardent birdwatcher, Mother stamps out that particular revolt; however, the son circumvents her by enlisting: "He wasn't drafted, no, that was the hell of it. He wanted to shoot at something or other so badly that he just ran off."¹⁸ Father and son share the need to escape, to do their living elsewhere than at home--"The way the boy had taken to the out-of-doors was not so much because he was a great bird lover, or nature lover, but because he couldn't find a place in the house to sit down."¹⁹ A brief alliance springs up between father and son over the fact that both use the same hiding place, a basement toilet; they also share the Christmas decorating until the father buys the gun as a Christmas present and Mother stops Christmas.

¹⁸Man and Boy, p. 12.

¹⁹Ibid., p. 11.

Mr. Ormsby gives in, but the Boy continues to cling to his manhood until he finally escapes Mother into death. Mrs. Porter's son, also missing in the war, ran away as a child, taking with him his father's things, refusing to touch his mother's. He had an ally in his sister for a time, but his protest against Mother led him to the same exit.

In The Deep Sleep there appears an old lady whose character reinforces the theme of the dominant mother. At ninety-nine, Grandmother has outlived her son, the Judge, in whose house she lives. She rouses the house at five a.m. by rattling her cane on the birdbox, partly to demand breakfast, partly to exact revenge (she has been forbidden to retrieve the morning paper from the porch); however, such futile and senile shows of power only serve to highlight her frustration at the loss of control she has suffered through age. Described as resembling a turtle or a turkey, with hands like claws, Grandmother has a nature stubborn, occasionally mean, and childishly sly. She has been divested of all but a few shreds of authority, and she strikes back by her frequent refusals to comply with household routine, by stealing candy like a child, and by laying about her with the only symbol of power remaining--her cane.

The major plot of The Deep Sleep concerns the effect of Judge Porter's death on his family and the townspeople who knew him. Of all the characters, not even excepting

Mrs. Porter, Grandmother shows least emotion, in fact, none at all, over the death of her only son. She seems to have expected that he would die before her. The only mention she makes of his death is to ask where he will be buried, merely as a matter of curiosity. On the night before the funeral, near the climax of the book, Grandmother takes center stage to tell an anecdote about the Civil War, a story startling in its vulgarity, with the punch line: "Fired two shots. . . one at the enemy and one in his britches!"²⁰

Grandmother strongly resembles Mother, except that her character has been less formulated by the fear of what others think of her, hence she has a certain toughness of mind or independence of thought lacking in Mother. That she has, however, exerted a real dominance over her son, appears in the fact that he never speaks to her directly, but always through an intermediary; further, toward the end of his life, the failing Judge Porter is roused by her solicitude ("You still poorly, Howard?") to cry out, "In the name of God. . . will you let me die?"²¹ This cry, so unlike the man whose gentleness has always led him to search out avenues of escape rather than to suffer an encounter with his wife, is forced from him under great pressure, the pressure not only of his mother's immutability and seeming deathlessness (for the Judge knows he will die before her), but also, I think,

²⁰Ibid., p. 253.

²¹Ibid., p. 129.

the continual pressure of her unflinching demand, her ambition for him which becomes, in his illness, too great to bear. Of their early relationship we have only a few hints, but these are significant. "Angela Rautzen Porter had her standards, and her son, Howard Porter, had his work cut out for him,"²² we are told early in the novel. Then, "In weekly letters to his mother, Howard Porter never mentioned his rise in the world. . . since he knew that his mother, Angela Rautzen Porter, merely expected it."²³ Thus we can piece out, even before her metamorphosis into an extremely strong-willed old lady, the picture of a mother whose demand lay so heavily on her son that she could relax into a calm assumption that her will would be done. We can see her behind the scenes, an abiding, unflinching and dominant presence, a reinforcement of the theme of the dominant mother.

Between Mrs. Porter and Grandmother we can sense a relationship marked, on Mrs. Porter's side by a complete lack of comprehension of the feelings or personality of the old lady, and on Grandmother's side by the same peevish scorn and backhanded contempt she accords nearly everyone else. There seems to be nothing personal in the running battle they carry on--a petty war in which Mrs. Porter attempts to deny Grandmother any number of things that are

²² Ibid., p. 58. ²³ Ibid., p. 59.

"bad" for her and to establish a firm set of rules for her behavior, and Grandmother proceeds to steal what is forbidden and to break or evade a goodly number of the rules. This lack of personal feeling, lack even of real animosity, suggests to me that the two women understand each other and the terms of combat very well--that, in fact, they resemble each other not a little in both outlook and character. The social views may have changed somewhat between one generation and the next, but both know the same power struggle. Of course, Grandmother is the vanquished, but she carries on a war of harassment with remarkable tenacity. The similarities between these two bring up another matter often proposed by psychologists: the Judge, and American husbands like him, have chosen their wives to replace Mother, and consequently continue the same dependency throughout their lives that they had as small boys.

SECTION II: BIRDS AND GUNS

Although the world of nature, which in America during the expansion west meant the wilderness, has traditionally been a male province, in Wright Morris, Mother has appropriated it, appropriated too, the power of the male. Just as she has emasculated her husband, so she has divided and catalogued the natural world. By nature Mother means Mother Nature and she conceives it as a world in which the females dominate: "'Among the birdfolk,' Mother said, 'the menfolk, so to speak, wear the feathers. The female has more serious work to do.'"²⁴ She also considers it a morally responsible world: "Without rising from the chair she waved the paper in the air and several bad birds left the birdbox. They knew. Their actions were perfectly deliberate."²⁵ What can one say of a bird who crashes a birdbox party? It is characteristic of Mother to demand that those inhabitants of the natural world which fall within her sphere live according to her rules. Not only are birds morally responsible, but in her scheme the savagery of the natural world is carefully suppressed. The Dawn Busters, a phony male name for what is

²⁴Man and Boy, pp. 43-44.

²⁵The Deep Sleep, p. 94.

really a female activity, or the Early Birds--these terms give a sense of the saccharine cuteness which colors Mother's view of nature, the kind of sentimentality in which she insists on preserving it, thus denuding the natural world of any real potency, any sense of the danger she feels in connection with the male. Mother delivers birdlore lectures titled "Peeks at my Window," in other words, the natural world seen through the civilized eyes of the Home.

Guns, in Man and Boy, represent the natural world as an arena for hunter and prey, a male world. Mrs. Ormsby was frightened as a child by the sight of her uncle firing a rifle from his doorway at a flock of wild ducks, and at precisely that point in her life took up her defense of birds. Although Mr. Ormsby, significantly, never had a fun, the Boy "without the fun. . .gave you the feeling he was not all there. That some vital part, vital limb, that is, had been amputated. He was all thumbs, as his Mother said, and without the gun over his arm he might fall down just walking across the room. It was the gun that made a hero out of him."²⁶ Of course, guns symbolize not only male potency, but also the primotypical role of the man as hunter; the Boy hunts birds. Since he will not relinquish his masculinity, the only way out for a son in this world of Mothers, is to turn up missing or dead.

²⁶Man and Boy, p. 6.

While Mother permits some birds and an occasional squirrel to represent nature, in its sweeter aspects, other animals are suspect. Dogs are bad--Mother gave away the Boy's dogs. But the wilderness attracts the Boy, though Mother's interest extends only to the roads through it. As Mr. Ormsby puts it:

He had always agreed with whoever it was that said the most beautiful thing in the wilderness was a road. He had never mentioned that to the boy, as he had known right from the beginning that the boy would not find it true. . . . For the boy, life began where Mr. Ormsby was sure it ended--where the lawn stopped and the seedling grass shot up knee high. Mother had walked all the trails in the state, but she had never left the back yard because there were no trails there to take. The boy came and went without breaking one. Only in the winter could you see how many times he left the yard, but in the summer the grass was back as soon as he passed.²⁷

The opposition of Mother and son, or of female and male, can be found in the opposing symbols of birds and guns, of domesticated nature against the wilderness.

That birds symbolize the dominance of women, is perhaps best expressed in this passage from The Deep Sleep:

The woman and the child, the hook-up of nature that was both public and private, seemed to sum up all the problems that he was powerless to resolve The core of the problem, if it had one, was like the dried melon seeds in the bird box, held in reserve for birds described as the friendly type. All other birds got a clip on the noggin from the lethal cane. Once the male bird broke away from the saddle on the hip, or the angular cane, or the sponge-like gaze that held him like a pair of for-

²⁷Ibid., pp. 165-166.

ceps, he was free, and he was also more or less detached from life. From the female bird's private functional life.²⁸

The male has a choice, then--to be free but alone, or to join Mother's world, but surrender to the female order. He can be a man, or admit the dominance of Mother.

²⁸The Deep Sleep, pp. 183-184.

SECTION III: IN THE VACUUM

Mother's subjugation of her husband and children arises not only from a will to power, but also out of a limited mentality, a deep distrust of emotions, and fear of male potency as well as of her own sexuality.

Mother has rendered herself sexless inasfar as it lies in her power to do so. Of Mrs. Porter, Parsons says:

As attractive as Mrs. Porter was, and for a woman of her age she was very attractive, there was nothing you might call sexy about her. . . She had this habit of reading off the floor all the time. But she seemed to have no idea at all what it meant to a man. Out in the yard, especially in the summer, Parsons had often stood beside the Judge and watched Mrs. Porter go around the yard picking up twigs. Years ago that had been hard for him to do. Parsons had the feeling that it had also been hard on the Judge. But they had come to an understanding, and the understanding was that Mrs. Porter had never in her life had such an idea in mind. They knew it. There was never any doubt about that.²⁹

In another place, Judge Porter indicates that five years of marriage passed before he first had intercourse with his wife.

Of course Mother's attempt to suppress sex altogether is an impossibility and the subterranean drive emerges in odd places, notably in a housekeeping mania (sex is dirty and Mother has a passion against dirt), and in her extraordinary interest in bathroom matters. Whenever Mother has

²⁹Ibid., p. 122.

the stage, there is sure to be a plethora of housekeeping details: "Here they come! Mrs. Porter said, and removed the cigarette from the Dartmouth coaster, the hollow from the cushion, the scuff mark from the rug and on her way out of the room, from the Grandmother's apron pocket, a piece of wadded Kleenex and a turkey bone";³⁰ "Mrs. Porter examined a fresh impression in the tablecloth. It was round. The hot coffee pot had been placed on it. Lifting a corner of the cloth she saw the round pad of lint ironed into the table. 'No pad,' she said, 'Hot pot!';"³¹ "Mrs. Porter, a napkin in her hand, dabbed up tea Mrs. Braskine had spilled, and moved the glass she had left on the floor to a safer place";³² ". . . Mother went about the money-saving business of trying to make suds with a little piece of soap in a wire cage. The soap was very old, about the size of a button, and nothing like suds ever appeared, but the thrashing in the water stirred up a few bubbles that looked like soap."³³ Now, Mother's monomania for housekeeping says something not only about the submergence of sex in her life but also about a whole complex of ideas, which include a strong frugality (and this, too, may relate to her repression of sex, in that her money-saving quirks, a wire cage with a hopeless button of soap, or a used paper towel hung out to dry, seem a neur-

³⁰Ibid., pp. 231-232.

³¹Ibid., p. 88.

³²Ibid., p. 254.

³³Man and Boy, pp. 50-51.

otic extreme), a constant concern for appearances--are the neighbors looking, is a slip showing, is viewing the dead "in" or "out"--and again, a power motive in opposition to the male: "When he came into the kitchen she saw the sweat showing dark around his collar, and she took the Air-Wick bottle from the shelf, gave the wick a pinch."³⁴

Moreover, this preoccupation with cleanliness has a definite sensuous quality; bodily odors and personal habits proliferate among details characterizing Mother. Walking Air-Wick around the house, smelling soiled garments, examining garter rings, scratching a spot on her clothes, picking lint from a sleeve, rubbing hair from her legs, clipping toenails, blowing her nose, pulling at her girdle; the catalogue goes on and on. All women do these things and their physical nature would not be remarkable were it not for the vulgarity with which Mother invests her most intimate activities. She leaves the water running while using the bathroom, for instance, but shouts down the laundry chute at her husband about the bathroom plumbing merely to let him know that she knows. She spreads newspapers over the floors, supposedly to keep them clean, and then reads them in a stooping position. Such a show of delicacy is really indecent, because it assumes dirtiness at the bottom of things.

³⁴The Deep Sleep, p. 227.

The picture of Mother with a piece of soiled linen at her nose discloses the hypocrisy of her notions of personal cleanliness: she enjoys finding dirt, takes a perverted pleasure in discovering the dirtiness of things. Her pleasure is dual, since she can righteously condemn the shorts to the laundry chute and at the same time derive a kind of satisfaction at finding them dirty.

I think there is another reason why Mother's life seems circled by objects. Just as she moved from object to object, the sight of one thing reminding her of another, so her ability to think circles or moves obliquely; Mother does not have the ability to reason in a straight line. "Before the Friends of the Quail, a national organization, she had given a talk she called 'Consider the Lilies,' with special reference to the fact that they toiled not, neither did they spin. What she had in mind was not lilies but birds. . . . The saying was plain enough, but Mother always managed to use it, like she did the lilies, in a very original way. It gave what was generally described as depth to everything she said."³⁵ This confusion of metaphors typifies her muddled thinking which makes her conversation a string of non sequiturs. But Mother does not really carry on conversation; she makes pronouncements, and others can listen or not listen as

³⁵Man and Boy, pp. 44-45.

they please. "People were often uncertain to whom her mother was speaking. At an early age Katherine discovered that she was not really talking to people, but while they were present she talked to herself aloud."³⁶ This can often be confusing since her mind darts from one object to another: "That was the way her mind worked, all over the place in one cup of coffee, Walter Lippman one moment, Mrs. Myrtle Dinardo the next."³⁷ The fact that people are discussed here makes no real difference--for Mother people are objects, too.

"Grandmother in Basement / Dry Cleaning in Hallway", reads one of Mrs. Porter's notes. After a long disciplining of herself, Mrs. Porter has succeeded in eliminating feelings from her life, so that only thingshold reality for her. She has found that treating people as objects makes them easier to control (with some exceptions) but, more importantly, treating people as objects allows her to think of them as such; thus she escapes entanglement even with members of her own family. Now the problem of why Mother wants to do away with emotion is a more difficult one. Perhaps she equates emotion with weakness, as some strong-minded people do, or perhaps the emotional life is too close to the sexual life to be tolerable for her. At any rate, it is quite obvious that she has established herself in an emo-

³⁶The Deep Sleep, p. 8.

³⁷Man and Boy, p. 46.

tional vacuum. Of her dead husband Mrs. Porter writes:

Howard gave up the losing battle Sunday a.m., just before dawn. Have just come from Clough and Bayard but very much doubt if you would recognize it, modern interior, euonymous (you-wan-imus) I think, in front. . .Am here in S & C buying Howard black shoes as sent only other pair of blacks to James.³⁸

Truly terrible is the emotional vacuity of a woman whose husband's death means for her the decor of a funeral parlor and the purchase of a pair of shoes. Of his son's death Mr. Ormsby thinks: "Let God strike him dead if he had ever known anything righter, more natural, that is, than that the boy would be killed. . .the boy would find a way, he knew, to fit into the master plan. Mother had a way of getting the best out of everyone."³⁹ To the subjugated husband, in other words, the death of Mother's rebellious son is only the working out of her master plan, the best use she can make of him under the circumstances. To Mother herself her son's death means chiefly a public occasion and a platform for her "Consider the Lilies" speech.

In thinking about her mother's lack of emotional connection, Katherine Porter says:

. . .her mother had lived all of her life, it seemed to Katherine, in a kind of phone booth, cut off from her family. . . Anything that was bottled up and sealed off from the others, like the insects in amber that her father brought her, made Katherine first think of her mother. . . That was not

³⁸The Deep Sleep, p. 177.

³⁹Man and Boy, p. 8.

saying that her mother was right, or that a human being should be trapped in a phone booth, but it seemed to suit her mother, and if you looked around and saw what life did to people, there was something to be said for what her mother had worked out. . . her mother, seated right there at the counter, had her hermetically sealed unit right along with her, the phone booth that sealed out the life that distracted everybody else.⁴⁰

It is not simply fear, a retreat from what life does to people that can have motivated a woman like Mrs. Porter to lock herself so entirely from a life of entanglement, of feeling; rather, her sense of principle, of living by the rules, has led her to the understandable, if regrettable notion that rules may properly be substituted for life. "I simply try to live up to the rules,"⁴¹ she says of herself. This is true inasmuch as anyone who chooses the rule over the sort of chance-taking implicit in an emotive act may be said to live. But both Mother and Mrs. Porter are women for whom the rule has taken the place of the life that distracts us. That is perhaps part of the reason why they are never at a loss, always in command. Both ladies at times appear admirable in their generalship of difficult situations--illness, an argument, a public embarrassment--but, on the other hand, both reject a life which is not prescribed, heavily insured against human weakness. Mrs. Porter is described as a woman without human failings, and this nearly means a woman without human feelings--"She had

⁴⁰The Deep Sleep, pp. 149-152.

⁴¹Ibid., p. 150.

never, so far as Katherine knew, ever said a kind word to them as children, or ever shown the need for a such kind word herself."⁴²

Because Mother is so emotionally repressive, children and husbands in these novels are emotionally starved. Mrs. Porter's children, having decided they must be orphans, turn to a neighbor for mothering. Judge Porter takes long drives with his hired man to escape his home and gain some companionship. Mr. Ormsby, cut off from his son by Mother, goes weak in the knees when, his fatherhood realized for a moment, he hears his son call him Pop. However, he cannot maintain his fatherhood, and although his grief over the boy's death is intense (Mother shows none), he clings to the thought that his son is sealed into a casket, immune from decay, because that's how Mother wants it. This dependency cuts him off from his son in death as it has in life.

⁴²Ibid., pp. 35-36.

SECTION IV: MOTHER AND THE ARTIST

Of a number of artist characters which appear in the novels of Morris, one, because he has a direct share in Mossis' observation and commentary on the American mother, is Paul Webb, from The Deep Sleep.

Naturally enough the writer chooses an artist, a man consciously aware of his surroundings, to articulate his own viewpoint. In the person of Webb, left in an upstairs bedroom shortly after his introduction to the Porter house, Morris defines his own approach to art:

. . .It was all there in the mirror. . . He had been led through the house, room by room, so that this room had come as a symbolic climax, as if the house had gathered itself together in the lens of the mirror. Beginning at the back, beginning with the kitchen, each room seemed to open on a wider vista, a deeper, more ambitious prospect of American life. A sense of summer leisure, of sweetness and bounty, of innocence and promise without melancholy, seemed to pass through the house. . . It seemed to Webb, right at that moment, that he had gone abroad not to find himself, or other such prattle, but in order to return to this room and rediscover America. To find in this house the spaciousness of American life. . . It was the house, the house itself, set in its miniature suburban forest, that brought the conflicting forces together and gave them shape. . . . It had struck Webb as a sort of revelation, the challenge he had awaited as a man and an artist, and at that very moment the ear-splitting racket range through the house. And for the length of that moment, like reflections on water, the images in the mirror all ran together, the pattern was shattered, and the house itself seemed about to fall. . .⁴³

⁴³Ibid., pp. 6-7.

When a writer begins to talk of symbolic climaxes and of rediscovering America, one can be fairly certain that he is discussing his own craft. When, however, he sets a mirror at the heart of the scene--that mirror which Shakespeare held up to nature, and which Hawthorne used to describe the process of his art--then no doubt remains but that Webb the artist and through him Morris the artist is attempting to define the nature and scope of his craft and its message.

What Webb sees gathered in the lens of the mirror is a house, a suburban American house, and he sees it as a framework for the shaping of conflicting forces. Webb also sees in his vision an America of the ambitious prospect, of summer leisure, sweetness, bounty, innocence, promise, spaciousness--an entirely hopeful vision, is it not?--and just as he begins to feel its challenge to him both as an artist and a man the vision is shattered. What shatters it, and vibrates the house, is the Grandmother's cane on the birdbox. Her "lethal" cane, to be exact, and in Webb's mirror the house seems about to fall. Another house comes to mind, vibrating under Mother's pounding hairbrush, as she calls her husband to heel. Certainly one of the conflicting forces in Webb's vision is the combat of male and female, more specifically of male and Mother, and Webb knows the conflict to be mortal, dangerous both to his art and his manhood.

Through the novel, in rising momentum, Webb, the

embattled artist and man, fights the sterile domination of Mother. An early encounter is over the question of what he shall wear to the Funeral:

"We're going to have to be on our good behavior," Mrs. Porter said. . .
 "Katherine.."
 "Yes, Mother--"
 "Would one of your father's shirts fit him?"
 "We've gone into that, Mother. You know his arms are about a foot longer." . . .
 "I know what artists are wearing," she said, "but I do not know what they're wearing at funerals."
 She waited to hear if her daughter did, but Katherine did not. Turning from the door, Mrs. Porter stepped to jot down something on the phone pad in the hallway, then she crossed the hall and entered the bathroom, closed the door.⁴⁴

Mrs. Porter's admonition to good behavior, although tactfully plural, can only be meant for Webb; she can be sure of everyone's behavior but his. This oblique attack she carries through by refusing to address him directly, calling for support from her daughter. When not satisfactorily reinforced, she takes full command: her jotted note, as it turns out, is to remind herself to buy him a shirt for the funeral.

However, the matter of his taste in funeral attire (hence, in living--does he know how to behave?) brings about the only open encounter between Mrs. Porter and Webb:

"If he was alive," said Webb, "I'd walk on my hands and knees all day to see him. But I don't intend to walk anywhere to see him dead."

⁴⁴Ibid., p. 22.

When he said that, Mrs. Porter slowly turned and looked at him. . . . As her mother gazed at him, she saw him blink, then fall back a step.

"You say he has another shirt along with him?" Mrs. Porter said.

Paul did not speak, he nearly seemed to be pinned there to the wall by her mother's calm gaze, her eyes fastened where the plaid sports shirt opened on his chest. He seemed unable to move, or to speak, until her mother turned back to the tray she had come in with. . .

"Let's get out of here, Parsons," he said. . . ⁴⁵

Ignominiously routed, defeated by a woman who has not even had to admit that there is a contest, Webb never again issues a direct challenge to Mrs. Porter, but, to his horror, he discovers that his wife shows symptoms of becoming like her. Discovering, too, the extent to which the Judge was victimized by Mrs. Porter and even by Grandmother, Webb engages in a sniping argument with his wife:

"'Will you please stop acting?' she said.

"'I know how you feel,' he said. 'For years I have been acting. I've been acting like a man. But now I'm not acting.'"⁴⁶

Even more disturbing to Webb is the knowledge that not only was the Judge capable of behaving like a "first-class celluloid Babbitt," that is, capable of hiding a bottle of whiskey in his desk, joking about it and then blushing when his secretary came in--behaving in other words like a mischievous kid, hiding out from Mama--but that he,

⁴⁵Ibid., pp. 77-78.

⁴⁶Ibid., p. 191.

Webb, is capable of slipping without knowing it into the same pattern:

He didn't have a liniment bottle in his car, or stuck in the back of the medicine cabinet, but before he took a swig of the Old Grand-Dad he had switched off the light. There you had it. There you had a picture of a really screwed up American. Paul Graham Webb, bohemian and artist, free thinker, free-liver, and man about town, switching off the fruit cellar light before he took a little nip.⁴⁷

Webb reacts to this new self-awareness, as well as the knowledge that his wife is in a fair way to becoming a replica of her mother, by getting a little drunk and fleeing to the attic. There Katherine finds him and there they engage in a bitter fight. This argument, the climax of the book, serves to highlight Morris' feeling about Momism, as Webb delivers it:

"...the first Commandment of the House reads--Thou shalt not give a particle of gratification. Thou shalt drive from the Temple the man who smokes, and he shall live in a tent behind the two-car garage, and thou shalt drive from the bed the man who lusts, and he shall lie in tourist camps with interstate whores, and thou shalt drive from the bathroom the man who farts, and he shall sit in a dark cubbyhole in the basement, and thou shalt drive from the parlor the man who feels, and he shall make himself an island in the midst of the waters, for the man who feels undermines the Law of the House!"

"Paul!" she said.

"Such are the Commandments, but alas, men are mortal, the tables of the Law are cracked and broken, and in the nightpot in the attic float the sins of the sinner, great and small. In the darkness of the basement sits he chambered with his carnal thoughts. On the Beauty Best mattress lies he in uneasy Pneumatic bliss."⁴⁸

⁴⁷Ibid., pp. 142-143.

⁴⁸Ibid., pp. 278-279.

The unusual fact that Webb, and through him Morris, has raised his voice to a shout in delivering this blast at Mother, indicates its importance to the book's meaning and to an understanding of the character of the American Mother. The speech demonstrates several points I have discussed in attempting to characterize Mother--first, that she dominates the values of the family (the Law of the House is her law), secondly, that through her commandments she attempts either to ignore or to repress human drives, appetites or feelings --not to give, in Webb's words, a particle of gratification. Finally, the Law of the House has made fugitives of Mother's husband and children. For them, paradoxically, Home has become only a place from which to escape.

There is no escape for Webb, the man with enough awareness to articulate these things. He has enough awareness also to accept his defeat and express it through a symbol. The symbol is a watch, a "Swiss ticker," which the Judge bought to commemorate the occasion when things "came to a head," when after five years of marriage he had intercourse with his wife. It expresses, then, the Judge's sense of his role as a male, his manhood. The Judge lost this watch and his wife found it. During the day which comprises the action of the book, Mrs. Porter is disturbed by the fact that the watch, symbol of her control of her husband, is missing; the Judge had put it away somewhere.

Webb finds it in the attic and at the end of the day he imagines himself handing it over to Mrs. Porter. Webb realizes the symbolism of the watch and he is somewhat ironically acknowledging that Mrs. Porter has won out.

SECTION V: COMPARISON AND CONTRAST

I would like now to have a look at the differences between the characters of Mother and Mrs. Porter, and to show how other characters fit into the pattern or vary from it.

The two women I have examined principally thus far are so much alike that it has been possible in most instances to cite one or the other or both as representative of a particular trait. Both are domineering women whose hold on their husbands is total. In neither case does any member of the family succeed in breaking this control of the home. Both women prescribe and demand other's adherence to, an extremely rigid code of behavior which is generally repressive toward feelings, appetites, human weaknesses and sex. This code has been refined in both instances to the minutest detail, with hundreds of resultant rules, ranging from the proper method of washing a plate to how many times a pair of socks may be worn to whether or not a man should be allowed both cream and sugar (he shouldn't). There is no situation not covered by one or more of these rules, and both women consider the business of life to be making sure that the rules are followed. Both, then, conduct their lives in terms of details.

The attitude of each of these women toward her husband is that of a mother toward a child. Although the mother

considers this child somewhat clumsy, stupid, and liable to mistakes, in neither case does the husband openly contest his position or the punishments he suffers. Of the sexual relations in these marriages we have only indirect evidence, but it seems clear that each woman feels distaste for and fear of sex; therefore, since they so entirely dominate their husbands, it would seem likely that they deny them sexual gratification. This is a specific charge in Webb's diatribe against Mrs. Porter. Of Mother's behavior in bed we have only the hint that she cannot be awakened by her husband's thrashing during a nightmare though she is unusually sensitive to other noises. In both cases the wives appear to ignore the whole matter of sex, not only in reference to their husbands, but as it applies to themselves as well.

Both women appear completely loveless; not only do they not receive any show of affection, they obviously do not give affection to others. The image of the phone booth expresses the sealed-off, isolated quality of their lives. They do not appear to enjoy anything or to find much that is funny in life. Both are singularly humorless.

As for the world of nature, insofar as it is permitted to intrude on their lives, they agree as to its aspects and meaning: the backyard garden, the birdbox and various flowers sum up nature according to their civilized

and sanguine view.

The only difference of any note between Mother and Mrs. Porter is an economic-social one. Mrs. Porter occupies a slightly higher income bracket than does Mother. Her house is somewhat larger, though we are told that its furnishings are unremarkable. She appears to have a more developed social sense than Mother; her telephone manners are better and she makes a stab at being tactful. These differences are, however, superficial ones and serve to point up the high degree of similarity between the two mothers.

I think that Mrs. Porter is really a more fully developed treatment of Mother, just as The Deep Sleep presents a fuller treatment of the same theme Morris presented in Man and Boy. This theme, as I have indicated, is the domination of the American home by Mother. The Deep Sleep is a better book, I think, because there is a variety of viewpoints focused on this theme and because Morris' obvious outrage over the situation is muted somewhat. Mrs. Porter, a more balanced, more dispassionately developed version of Mother, presents a solid instance of what Morris sees as false and deadening in our society.

Four years after The Deep Sleep there appears another woman in The Field of Vision who provides an extension and fortification of Morris' delineation of the American mother. Lois McKee inhabits, in common with the other ladies, an emotional and spiritual wasteland. The great difference

is that she realizes it because she was once touched by life. As a young girl she had been brought fully awake by Gordon Boyd's kiss, but the vibrant life it aroused frightened her--"she felt all over like the hum the wires make in a telephone pole. . . a current all over her body and the feeling that if she touched something it would spark. . . she didn't trust her own senses, and the ground kept shifting beneath her feet. She had just enough wit to do what she could. She married McKee."⁴⁹ Although she inhabits the same emotional vacuum ("when she felt something pretty strong she froze up")⁵⁰, and her attitude toward her husband is identical with that of Mother and Mrs. Porter, she differs from them in that she had a point of intense life to compare with her present death-in-life. This means that her contempt for her husband is undisguised: ". . . she. . . saw his mouth pucker like a hen's bottom. Into it, like a cork, he put the wet end of his cigar. Before she heard what she knew he was about to say, she pressed the automatic button that rolled up the window. A goldfish, his lips still puckered, he stood there a moment staring at her. . ."⁵¹

Her irritation with McKee rises from the fact that he was a witness to her first kiss, that he allowed it, and,

⁴⁹The Field of Vision, p. 35.

⁵⁰Ibid., p. 28. ⁵¹Ibid., p. 136.

most importantly, that he never had enough imagination to know what it meant to her. . . "had it ever crossed the ninny's mind to have a suspicion?"⁵² McKee has been effectively cuckolded all the years of his marriage by his wife's memory of a kiss. At the end of the novel, McKee stands outside his car, totally ignored by the family inside, carrying a large pair of bull's horns.

Toward the physical side of marriage Lois McKee has a reaction symptomatic of the same frigidity exhibited by Mother and Mrs. Porter ("He brought his hand down hard on her knee. . . .It was something he normally wouldn't think of doing. . .")⁵³, but, although she refuses a timid high school teacher's proposition, Mrs. McKee is aware of herself as a woman. Thus, the meaning of the bullfight for her is contained in a brash lad's escapade in the arena with a piece of flag on a stick: "She knew not only what had hit her, but where, and when that crazy boy went over the fence, she hadn't fainted at all, strictly speaking, she had swooned. Hadn't Alice Morple warned her. . .? 'That type of boy,' she had said. . ., 'just loves to go over your fence.'"⁵⁴ The brash masculinity of the boy's act reminds Lois McKee of Gordon Boyd, who once tried to walk on water for her, and having been hit where she lives, she swoons. Out of

⁵²Ibid., p. 137. ⁵³Ibid., p. 38. ⁵⁴Ibid., p. 88.

a profound dissatisfaction with her marriage and the existence she chose because of her fear, Mrs. McKee's buried life erupts into a passionate love for a grandson whom she spoils utterly. Thus she presents a slightly different view of Mother; though the outward signs are all the same, this woman knows she is in a phone booth and feels the desolation of it so intensely that she swoons over the reincarnation of an event that occurred thirty years before.

An even greater shift of emphasis is present in Ceremony in Lone Tree. Here we are presented with a woman, Maxine Momeyer, whose husband is so obviously a fool (he likes to hunt the neighborhood cats with bow and arrow), that the reader's sympathy shifts to the wife. Exhausted by her husband's vagaries, and afflicted with an aching back, feet, head, legs, Maxine stumps along her painful way, and if she assumes family responsibility and regards her husband as a child, it is because he will assume no responsibility and is not only a child but a rather moronic one. His selfishness and harassment of a too-sex-conscious daughter have worn her out and Maxine is unutterably sick of it all.

However, as ballast to Maxine, in this latest book, the McKees put in a second appearance, so that, although there is a detectable drift of sympathy for one overworked wife, the other's commanding presence overshadows it, and Morris' basic position, although qualified, remains essentially unchanged.

Whether his attack on Mother can be justified or not, Morris' method, that of understatement has the virtue of calling attention to assumed values; one can hear in all these novels the voice of the author, calling from behind the scenes, "Look, you people--just look at yourselves!"

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